

Grassley's ghostwriter exits Hill

When Paul Thacker announced in July that he was leaving the Senate Finance Committee, you could practically hear drug company lobbyists whooping for joy. In the eyes of industry hands in Washington, he's a wild-eyed regulatory Robespierre who takes a sadistic glee in making them squirm, which he did a lot of in his capacity as lead investigator on healthcare issues for Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA), the once and probably future chairman of that powerful committee.

It's hard to dispute the sadistic glee bit. In an email announcing that he was leaving the Hill to join the Project on Government Oversight, a muckraking non-profit where he'll continue looking for healthcare fraud and waste, Thacker promised "those downtown who are celebrating" that he was "wrapping up some presents that will drop out the bomb door after I leave." One of those bombshells was the revelation that the American Heart Association's journal *Circulation* ran a ghostwritten article promoting Glaxo-SmithKline's Avandia. It dropped the day after he left the Senate.

Unlike most Hill denizens, who are typically lawyers by training, Thacker came to Washington as a journalist, one specializing in FOIA-fueled, document-based investigative pieces. The skill set is the same.

"It's the ability to walk into a room and figure out pretty quickly who's who and what's what," he says, "and also to pretty much know the answer before you ask the question."

When Thacker was working on a 2006 piece for Salon.com looking into the Bush Administration's efforts to tamp down any talk of a connection between climate change and hurricanes ("The Climate Controlled White House"), he was grilling a White House

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Paul Thacker

Investigator, Project on Government Oversight

2007-2010

Investigator, Senate Finance Committee

2007

Various, Inside Higher Ed and Public Education Center

2004-2007

Associate editor, Environmental Science and Technology

flack and getting evasive answers until he began reading from emails he'd obtained. The flummoxed flack quipped: "If you already knew the answer, why did you ask the question?" That's kind of his thing.

Thacker speaks in a fast-paced, caffeinated patter of indiscernible dialect. He moved a lot growing up, because his dad did construction and the family followed the housing boom from city to city. He joined the Army right out of high school, driving tanks, as a means of going to college and studied science once he got there but gravitated toward reporting. A series of stints at science mags took him to Washington. Journalism was in decline and in interviewing bureaucrats, he realized that he had investigative skills that few in government did, so he applied to some investigative committees and landed in Grassley's office.

It's a small world of Hill people that do investigative work. Thacker estimates there's about 150 of them.

"A lot of people don't like to do oversight because, inherently, you piss people off and make enemies," he says. "Few Senators or Representatives want to be out at a fundraiser and have a lobbyist come up and say, 'Why are you investigating my friend?'" Grassley, he said, is immune to those pressures in part because he works long hours like the old farmer he is and doesn't hobnob.

Thacker's dreaded letters demanding detailed information on marketing practices have probably ruined many a pharma chieftan's sleep, but his work there ultimately led to the Physician Payments Sunshine Act, a far-reaching set of transparency measures that was incorporated into the Affordable Care Act, aka healthcare reform. Thacker regrets that the bill didn't cover third-party payments to physicians, which he sees as a form of influence laundering, but sees the legislation as a good first step toward changing the culture of pharma promotion.

"All of these problems we identified were well known," he says, "but they were allowed to occur because the culture had reached a point where certain types of behavior were normalized at the time. We're not completely there yet — there's going to be push-back — but we've got people thinking more about what's happening."

— Matthew Arnold

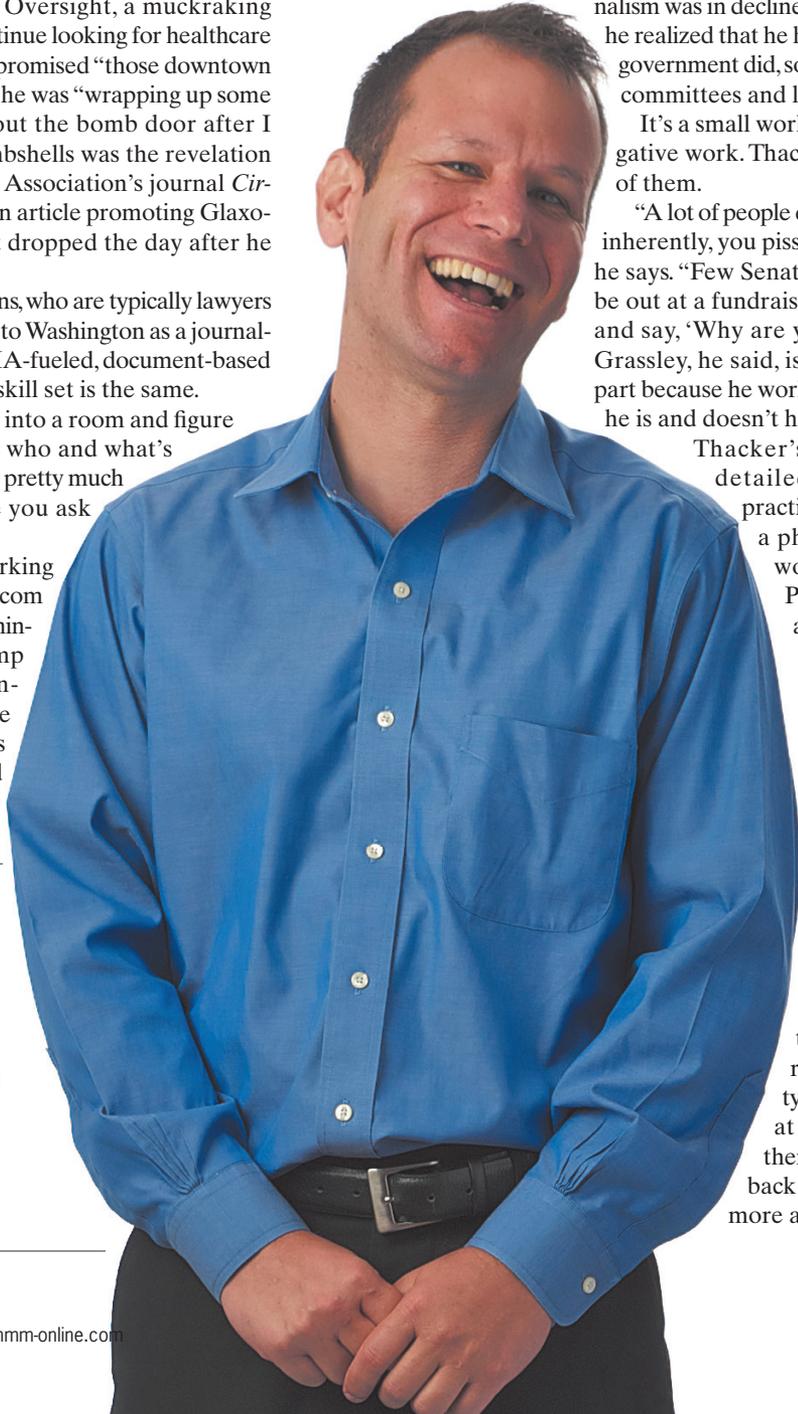


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